

Mendieta in Miami

A Map & Guide



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Untitled (Ochún) 1981

IN NUMEROUS MULTIMEDIA AND PERFORMANCE-BASED ARTWORKS THAT INCORPORATED HER OWN BODY, ANA MENDIETA USED ART TO REPLENISH HER CULTURAL ROOTS AND TO EXPLORE UNIVERSAL SPIRITUAL THEMES. ALTHOUGH SHE WAS ONLY 36 WHEN SHE DIED IN 1985, SHE LEFT A RICH ARTISTIC LEGACY THAT HAS INFLUENCED SUBSEQUENT GENERATIONS OF ARTISTS.

Born in Havana, Cuba in 1948, Mendieta was relocated to Iowa in 1961 as part of “Operation Pedro Pan.” She was one of fourteen thousand unaccompanied children whose political asylum in the U.S. was facilitated by the Catholic Church in response to Cuba’s Communist revolution. The shock of being abruptly immersed within a new culture was compounded by the trauma of separation from her parents at the age of 12. On many occasions, Mendieta attested to a sense of displacement, to feeling perpetually uprooted. This inner restlessness fueled a life-long quest for origins that prompted her to visit a number of locations, which included Miami.

Mendieta’s engagement with this city began in 1961 with the three weeks that she and her older sister Raquelín spent in “Camp Kendall” 1. Adjacent to what is now Indian Hammocks Park, this site was one of several locations where the children of Pedro Pan were sheltered while the local Catholic Welfare Bureau worked to secure their asylum and refuge. With no adult family members in the U.S. to claim them, the Mendieta girls were sent to St. Mary’s Home in Dubuque, Iowa and later placed in foster care. Not until 1966—when Ana had already graduated from high school—were they reunited with their mother and younger brother; they would not see their father again until 1979, when Ana was 30.

During the summer of 1968, Mendieta traveled to Miami in the company of her mother, and in the summer of 1970 she came back alone. Already home to thousands of Cuban expatriates, South Florida had become a major site for the development of distinct Cuban-American identities. With such close ties to the island nation, Miami held for Mendieta the promise of a partial reconnection with her roots, while providing a broader frame of reference for her own exile experience.

In 1978 and 1979, exiled Cubans were allowed to travel to Cuba for the first time since the imposition of the embargo in 1962. In January of 1980, Ana made her first return trip to the island, reuniting with her grandparents and other close relatives. Mendieta took six additional trips to Cuba, often pausing in Miami en route. During these stopovers, she developed close friendships with local Cuban-Americans and created several important artworks. The first of these was an ephemeral “earth-body” sculpture, *Untitled (Ochún)*, executed in 1981 at Crandon Park beach in Key Biscayne 2 as part of Mendieta’s participation in the exhibition *Latin American Art: A Woman’s View* at the Frances Wolfson Gallery of Miami Dade College (October – November) 3. Consisting of two small, fragile mounds of sand, the work represents the simplified female shape that comprised Mendieta’s main symbolic motif (the *silueta*, or silhouette). The image also suggests two coastlines separated by a body of water, and the title refers to an Afro-Cuban goddess associated with reconciliation and the resolution of conflict. Situated directly on the seashore, the work expressed the pains of separation borne by many Cubans both on the island and abroad.

At the end of the same year, Mendieta created *Ceiba Fetish* at Cuban Memorial Park in Little Havana, at the intersection of SW 8th Street and 13th Avenue 4. In addition to a monument to the Bay of Pigs invasion, the park features a ceiba (or kapok)—a large tree sacred to devotees of various traditional religions, including Afro-Cuban Santería. Using locks of hair collected from a barber shop nearby on Calle Ocho, Mendieta rendered an image directly on the tree. She later took pride in how the work had been intuitively embraced by local members of the exile community: “They have really activated the image and claimed it as their own.” For several years, individuals continued to place devotional objects near the work, layering its artistic significance with a spiritual dimension. In 1996, a joint memorial service for Mendieta and the children of Pedro Pan was held at this spot.

In the spring of 1982, during another stopover on her way back from Cuba, Mendieta created an outdoor piece titled *Maroya* in the backyard of the home of her friends Juan Lezcano and César Trasobares, not far from *Ceiba Fetish*; the work references the Amerindian goddess of the moon, and was meant to be ignited repeatedly in the moonlight. This location was also where Mendieta first began collecting leaves for her “leaf drawings” 5. In the fall of the same year (October – November), an exhibition of works by Mendieta was presented at Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami 6. *Ana Mendieta: Outdoor Sculpture* consisted of four sets of work made from natural materials indigenous to the South Florida region. *Arbol de la Vida*

Ana Mendieta: Earth Body Sculpture and Performance 1972–85

on view at Miami Art Museum October 2, 2005 – January 15, 2006



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Untitled 1982

(Tree of Life) was a topiary piece consisting of a vinelike plant grown on an armature shaped like a woman's body; Mendieta described it as a "blooming silueta" **7**. For *Untitled* (Body Tracks), Mendieta used a branding iron in the shape of her hand to burn imprints in the grass. *Ánima* was a floor sculpture made of stones and rock crystals. Lastly, the *Tallus Mater* (Stem Mother) series comprised several sculptures made from ficus roots twisted into different variations evoking the female form. These roots were collected along Coral Way and South Miami Avenue, as well as at a secluded downtown spot north of Jackson Memorial Hospital **6**.

While it would be a mistake to reduce the intricate, multi-dimensional story of Ana Mendieta to any one issue, for many it is difficult not to see in it some of the poignant, universal aspects of emigration and exile. From the hunger to reconnect with an inaccessible homeland to the need to resolve the contradictions that arise in processes of cultural fusion—these aspects are never far beneath the surface of Miami's complex, ever-evolving character. In this sense, Mendieta's work and her brief, intense life bear meanings that continue to resonate forcefully throughout this city of immigrants.

René Morales, Curatorial Research Assistant

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- 1** Indian Hammocks Park SW 114th Ave and 79th St
- 2** Crandon Park Key Biscayne
- 3** Frances Wolfson Gallery Miami Dade College, 300 NE 2nd Ave
- 4** Cuban Memorial Park SW 8th St and 13th Ave
- 5** Private residence vicinity of SW 12th St and 12th Ave
- 6** Lowe Art Museum University of Miami, 1301 Stanford Dr
- 7** Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden
10901 Old Cutler Rd, Coral Gables
Mendieta's *Arbol de la Vida* (Tree of Life) has been recreated in conjunction with MAM's exhibition and is temporarily installed at Fairchild. This work was originally presented at the Lowe Art Museum in 1982. For dates and information call 305.667.1651.
- 8** Areas where Mendieta gathered materials for artworks
near NW 16th Ave and 18th St, and near Coral Way and SW 26th Rd

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Front *Untitled* (Ochún) 1981, Still image from DVD, Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, courtesy Galerie Lelong, New York. Photography: © Zindman/Fremont, New York. Back *Untitled* 1982, Design on leaf, Private Collection César Trasobares and Juan Lezcano. Photography: Lee Stalsworth/Smithsonian Institution.